

Durham Research Online

Deposited in DRO:

18 March 2010

Version of attached file:

Published Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Fell, Alison S. and Welch, Edward. (2009) 'Annie Ernaux : socio-ethnographer of contemporary France : Introduction.', Nottingham French studies., 48 (2). pp. 1-5.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/french/nfs/special-issues/volume482.aspx>

Publisher's copyright statement:

Additional information:

Use policy

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.

INTRODUCTION

ALISON S. FELL AND EDWARD WELCH

Since the publication of *La Place* in 1983, Annie Ernaux has become a well-known author in France. Many of her texts have featured on best-seller lists, and have received critical acclaim (*La Place*, for example, was awarded the Prix Renaudot), and interviews with her regularly appear in the French media. Yet it is only recently that her work has been the subject of published academic research in France.¹ Previously, the majority of critical assessments of Ernaux's œuvre were carried out by anglophone critics, or by francophone critics working outside of France. This is evident, for example, if one considers the monographs focusing exclusively on her work that have been published since the late 1990s.² There are several reasons why Ernaux was taken up more quickly by anglophone literary critics. Firstly, the critical reception of her work in France was decidedly mixed, with some journalists refusing to recognise any literary merit in her works.³ Secondly, her deceptively simple style – 'l'écriture plate' (P 24) – meant that her works were frequently chosen as set texts for academic syllabuses in anglophone schools and universities. And, finally, at a historical moment in which feminism was beginning to have a real impact on research carried out in UK and US universities, her writing had immediate appeal for feminist academics. In a 2003 article, for example, Lyn Thomas and Loraine Day both describe how they immediately identified with Ernaux's analysis of class and gender dynamics, which complemented both their own engagement with second-wave feminism, and proved a successful addition to the 'women's writing' courses they devised for undergraduates.⁴

1. Recent French critical works on Ernaux's writing include: Fabrice Thumerel (ed.), *Annie Ernaux: une œuvre de l'entre-deux* (Arras: Artois Presses Université, 2004); 'Dossier: Annie Ernaux', special issue of *Trajectoires* 3 (2006); Francine Dugast-Portes, *Annie Ernaux: Étude de l'œuvre* (Paris: Bordas, 2008); Adrien Scharff, *Le Temps et le moi dans l'œuvre d'Annie Ernaux* (Paris: Éditions Le Manuscrit, 2008).
2. See Jérôme Meizoz, *Annie Ernaux: une politique de la forme* (Genève: Slatkine, 1996); Claire-Lise Tondeur, *Annie Ernaux ou l'exil intérieur* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996); Lyn Thomas, *Annie Ernaux: An Introduction to the Writer and her Audience* (Oxford: Berg, 1999); Siobhán McIlvanney, *Annie Ernaux: The Return to Origins* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001); Loraine Day, *Writing Shame and Desire: The Work of Annie Ernaux* (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2007). See also, in German, Heike Ina Kuhl, 'Du mauvais goût': *Annie Ernauxs Bildungsaufstieg als literature und gesellschaftskritische Selbstzerstörung* (Tübingen, Niemeyer: 2001).
3. See Thomas, *Annie Ernaux*, pp. 140-61.
4. See Loraine Day and Lyn Thomas, 'Exploring the interspace: Recent dialogues around the work of Annie Ernaux', *Feminist Review*, 74 (2003), 98-104.

Ernaux herself, having initially been hesitant to label her work as 'feminist', has described how her experiences of the negative gendered criticism of *Passion simple* and *L'Événement* led her to welcome interpretations of her work influenced by gender studies:

Il y a une douzaine d'années encore, je manifestais une certaine méfiance vis-à-vis des lectures féministes. La réception sexiste violente de *Passion simple* et, celle, plus sournoise, de *L'Événement* m'ont fait changer d'avis et estimer légitime que soit pris en compte le *genre* dans les textes des femmes.⁵

As a result of the feminist approaches of many of the academics writing about Ernaux's work, the majority of studies have focused on the autobiographical *récits* in which the discourses and dynamics of gender play a central role, particularly those published from 1983 to 1997 – *La Place*, *Une femme*, *Passion simple*, *La Honte* and '*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*'. These studies develop themes such as desire and sexuality, shame, family relationships and the transgression of social and literary norms – themes that are clearly central to Ernaux's writing.⁶

The articles in this volume examine, rather, texts which do not recount the familiar tale of class migration and its concomitant themes of language, *embourgeoisement* through education, sexuality and the body, but those in which the focus is more evidently 'extérieur'. The works explored in detail here are her journalism and *journaux extimes*, *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure*. In addition, her more recent texts – *L'Usage de la photo* and *Les Années* – are also scrutinised. Although it may appear that, in her texts published since the late 1990s, Ernaux has come to be increasingly preoccupied with the realm of the private, dwelling at length on the vicissitudes of her personal and affective life, the contributors to this volume argue that there is nonetheless a continued preoccupation with the nature of the contemporary world and with the ways in which 'public' discourses impinge on individuals' lives. This may seem more evidently the case in her *journaux* in which the gaze is firmly focused 'outside'; but the interplay between 'dehors' and 'dedans', between private and public narratives, remains at the centre of Ernaux's project as a whole, something confirmed by the alternating use of singular and plural pronouns in her 2008 text, *Les Années*. For Ernaux, the 'je' is at least partially a collective voice – what she terms a 'je transpersonnel'⁷ – and her lived experiences, however troublingly intimate, are offered as ways into a potential unveiling of collective truths. Indeed, the epigraph to *Journal du dehors* that she takes from Rousseau – 'Notre vrai moi n'est pas tout entier en nous' – could be taken as an epigraph to the whole of her corpus.

5. Annie Ernaux, 'Préface' in Thumerel, *Annie Ernaux*, pp. 7-10 (p. 9).

6. Currently, in the MLA International Bibliography, approximately three quarters of articles and chapters published since 1997 concentrate on these texts.

7. See Annie Ernaux, 'Vers un je transpersonnel', *Cahiers RITM: Autofictions et cie*, 6 (1993), 219-23.

But if the aims of her autobiographical project have persisted over the years, what has changed, inevitably, is both her own subject-position, and the contours of the society with which that self is engaging. In terms of her own experience, she is now writing as a respected, wealthy writer rather than as a marginalised 'transfuge de classe'. Equally, her experience with cancer, chronicled in *L'Usage de la photo*, has brought the themes of transience and mortality to the forefront of her writing – themes which reoccur in *Les Années*. To borrow the terms of Pierre Bourdieu, Ernaux's most important influence in her understanding of the interaction of self and other in contemporary French society, Ernaux's *habitus* has clearly evolved since she began publishing in the late 1970s, as has the socio-cultural context in which she finds herself. Indeed, one of the common preoccupations of the articles in this volume is to track the encounter between a changing subjectivity and an 'extérieur' which itself is constantly shifting, and to consider how this encounter informs the construction of self in her auto-socio-biographical project.

At the same time, the aim of the articles is to offer a fresh reading of Ernaux's recent writings by placing them side by side with those of other artists, thinkers, writers, autobiographers and filmmakers who share some of her aesthetic, political and socio-ethnographic concerns. As she suggests in the interview carried out for this special issue, Ernaux herself would not immediately have recognised the figures with which she is aligned here as the most obvious points of reference for her work. Nevertheless, it seems to us that the comparative perspectives offered here serve at once to underline Ernaux's significance as an observer of the array of changes affecting the France of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – be they social, cultural, political or spatial – and to clarify some of the ways in which her work maps both these changes and the lived experience of them.

Two of the articles adopt a historical perspective, situating Ernaux's practice and preoccupations in relation to earlier generations of female writers, and sketch out a remapping of women's writing as they do so. Diana Holmes sets out to explore the parallels between the work of Ernaux and that of Colette. While it might at first seem that little connects the two, suggests Holmes, noting a range of differences at once formal and thematic, common ground between them is to be found in their shared attention to lived reality, and in particular to the nature of domestic space, and the bodily specificities of female experience. Élise Hugueny-Léger, in her article, aligns Ernaux with Marguerite Duras to consider their common interest in *faits divers*, those dramatic or shocking events which puncture the established order of the everyday. Like Holmes, she relates their concern with the *fait divers*, whose very disruptiveness lies in the fact that it is born of the events of daily life, to a broader preoccupation with the everyday. Hugueny-Léger argues that writing about the mostly anodyne, but occasionally violent, episodes of daily life represents both a mode of subjective investment in the world, and beyond that, a means of political engagement, as it enables them to uncover and

expose the often constrictive frameworks of class and gender which continue to shape society, and the place of women within it.

The remaining articles situate Ernaux in relation to a range of writers, filmmakers and artists who, like her, set out to explore and articulate the encounter between human subjects and the increasingly sophisticated and challenging environments which they inhabit, and to which they must adapt. Fiona Handyside brings *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure* together with Eric Rohmer's film *L'Ami de mon amie* to discuss the portraits they offer of life in the New Town of Cergy-Pontoise, born of the vast projects of rational urban and regional planning which defined the Gaullist era in post-war France. Contesting the dominant representations of the Parisian suburbs as places of bleak alienation or sleek modernity, Handyside suggests, both Ernaux and Rohmer depict the New Town as a complex and heterogeneous space whose liminality – neither city nor country – is productive of new modes of subjectivity. Edward Welch's article continues this investigation of Ernaux's response to the sites and frames of contemporary existence. He juxtaposes Ernaux's work with that of the artist and photographer Sophie Calle to highlight their shared preoccupation with the ubiquitous technologies of everyday life, and their role in determining human identity in the modern world. He argues that both Calle and Ernaux can be seen to depict our emergence into modern modes of social organisation variously termed 'software societies' or 'societies of control', and establish the often uncertain place for subjectivity within such societies.

The question of subjectivity and bodily experience in the modern world is of central concern in Alison Fell's essay, which examines Ernaux's account of her breast cancer in *L'Usage de la photo*. Fell situates the text within a broader history of breast cancer narratives, drawing attention to its disjunctive relationship to the dominant discursive modes of such narratives. Ernaux's text presents her experience of the disease in terms not of the heroic and redemptive battle of the sufferer, but of the metaphysical struggle sparked by a sudden confrontation with mortality. Like Welch, Fell argues that Ernaux's use of photography in the text is vital in her efforts to negotiate a place for her subjectivity in response both to the technologies of medical treatment she encounters, and the range of discourses which frame and produce the bodily experience of serious illness.

The often ambiguous nature of Ernaux's engagement in, and response to, contemporary society is the focus of Ruth Cruickshank's article. In her reading of *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure*, Cruickshank considers Ernaux's relationship to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and in particular to the explicitly political turn his work takes in the 1990s. She sets out to assess the extent to which Ernaux follows Bourdieu – to whose critical perspectives Ernaux lays claim in essays such as 'Raisons d'écrire', reprinted as part of this special issue – in undertaking a political project of critique with regard to the dominant order of contemporary French society. Cruickshank identifies the limits of Ernaux's

politics in her ambiguous attitude towards, and complicity in, globalised consumer culture.

One of the key questions implicitly asked by Ernaux in her work is the role of writing in representing – and helping to make sense of – the passage of an individual through an evolving social landscape. As she puts it in *Les Années*, her aim is to '[faire] ressentir le passage du temps en elle et hors d'elle, dans l'Histoire', and to do so in spite (or because) of her fear 'de se perdre dans la multiplicité des objets de la réalité à saisir' (A 158). What emerges above all from these articles is that Ernaux's examination of the 'dehors', of the external world in its social, technological and ideological manifestations, is simultaneously an articulation of the nature of the subject and of embodied existence within it; but it is also a call to pay heed to the subject's mutability, fragility and resistance in the face of the pressures that world places on it.⁸

8. In preparation for this special issue, a workshop was held at the University of Leeds in January 2008. We would like to record our thanks to the British Academy for its support of that event.